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ENABLING FACULTY-LED STUDENT SUCCESS EFFORTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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About the Author

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About the Series

On July 30, 2018, the American Council on Education (ACE) convened close to 40 nationally recognized higher education researchers and scholars to discuss strategies to increase completion rates, close equity gaps, and support leaders at our nation's community colleges. Informed by that meeting, ACE invited proposals from the participants for a series of action-oriented briefs focused on key topics for community college leaders. This brief is the first in that five-part series.



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Cover Photo: Faculty at ACE member institution Leeward Community College greet and congratulate students at the campus's spring 2016 commencement ceremony on May 13 at the Tuthill Courtyard. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To make a substantial difference in student persistence and completion, community college student success efforts must involve those people on campus who have the most frequent contact with students: the faculty. Indeed, if student success interventions are to be truly effective and sustainable, faculty should be leading them. This brief outlines one approach to enabling faculty-led student success efforts, which involves asking faculty to utilize data to identify specific challenges or barriers to success in their own departments or disciplines, and then design and implement long-term solutions.

Involving faculty in student success efforts at the departmental level is simply leveraging the faculty's existing investment in student success and giving them the tools necessary to improve upon what they already do. Situating this work at the departmental level is vitally important, as it allows colleges to employ a many-small-fires approach to student success, each one targeted to specific populations in specific corners of the college. One solution might make a difference in five students' lives, another in 1,500. Collectively and over time, they will fuel student success in a sustainable manner.

Some larger community colleges will utilize intricate data dashboards to provide faculty with information related to the success of students at the departmental or disciplinary levels. However, most small and mid-size colleges do not have the resources for this, and faculty at these institutions will need to partner closely with their college's institutional researchers to investigate persistence problems, equity gaps, and other challenges. Once these have been identified, faculty can build action plans that include the costs of interventions and iterative assessments and then work with administrators and others to implement them.

College leaders can enable this work by creating and reinforcing a culture of data-derived student success efforts at the departmental level, ensuring that sufficient resources (both human and financial) are made available, setting clear mandates for faculty and institutional researchers to collaborate, and recognizing the faculty's efforts through stipends, release time, and other less tangible rewards.

Introduction

No matter how student success is defined—attainment of a workforce or academic credential, elimination of equity gaps, improving time-to-degree, or any other measurable outcome—faculty play a key role. They have the most frequent contact with students, and they are uniquely positioned to make a meaningful difference in students' ability to complete their educational or training goals, especially at community colleges. But faculty cannot create change without support. The most effective initiatives for student success 1) receive support from the top, both verbal and financial; 2) are designed for the long-term; 3) utilize data in decision-making; and 4) involve those people on campus who have the most frequent contact with students (Achieving the Dream Partners 2009; Mayer et al. 2014; Rhoades 2012).

For student success efforts that are closely tied to teaching and learning to be effective and sustainable, faculty must be collaborators (Umbach and Wawrzynsky 2005), and they must be involved in ways that go beyond securing their buy-in once administrators have already settled on a new initiative or grant opportunity. One approach to enabling faculty-led student success efforts is to ask faculty to utilize data to identify specific barriers in their own departments and then design and implement long-term solutions. This approach enables faculty to take responsibility for the success of students in their own courses and departments and creates multiple, sustainable, data-driven student success efforts across campus.

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Why Involve Faculty in Student Success Efforts?

Let's be clear: faculty are *already* invested in student success. Community college faculty don't typically enter the professoriate just to teach; their purpose is (or at least should be) to help students learn (Barr and Tagg 1995). Providing them with the support and data necessary to enhance student learning is simply leveraging that investment and helping faculty improve upon what they already do. Furthermore, as we know from decades of student engagement literature (Astin 1993; Kuh et al. 2008; Umbach and Wawrzynsky 2005), the more faculty and students engage with one another, in class and out, the more likely the students are to persist and, ultimately, complete. Faculty know their students,

individually and as a group. They understand their challenges and have firsthand experience with what interventions work, at least at an individual level. Student success efforts that tap into that experience and expertise—as well as the direct contact with students—are far more likely to be successful than those that bypass or only minimally involve faculty (Rhoades 2012).

Of course, faculty have been intimately involved in student success efforts over the years. Yet there is a difference between involving faculty in student success and enabling them to lead those efforts. Ask any successful long-term college leader whether top-down or grassroots change strategies are more effective, and you'll hear a similar refrain. Shari Olson, president of South Mountain Community College in Arizona, put it well:

Leaders may come and go, but faculty often live in an organization for a very long period of time. If they are the impetus behind an idea, and you are just there to support them, that idea is more likely to still be in place years later than any idea you tried to impose on them. That's how true, sustainable, and lasting changes take place: by nurturing and supporting the grassroots involvement and efforts of faculty and staff.¹

As President Olson indicates, when faculty have ownership of efforts to improve student success in their classes and departments, they are more likely to be invested in the outcomes and less likely to resist what they perceive as the latest, greatest idea being championed by administrators. Furthermore, when faculty design and carry out long-term student success interventions, they are less likely to succumb to initiative fatigue (the very palpable sense that *none of this work really matters because in six months they will ask us to do something different anyway*).

Finally, when faculty lead student success efforts, most of the work occurs at the departmental level, turning the usual institutionalization processes on its head. Instead of experimenting with pilot programs, scaling them across the vastly different disciplinary cultures, identifying resources to sustain them, and securing buy-in from all the faculty and staff newly exposed to the work—the typical process of institutionalizing a grant-funded initiative—faculty can engage in iterative investigations into what is working and for whom within their own department or discipline. They can then collaborate with staff and administrators to implement long-term solutions that have built-in flexibility to adapt as change occurs or challenges arise. The goal should not be to scale to other departments or disciplines *unless it makes sense to do so*. Rather, this approach employs a many-small-fires strategy for student success, each effort targeted to specific populations in specific corners of the college. One solution might make a difference in five students' lives, another in 1,500. Collectively and over time, they will fuel student success in a sustainable manner.

¹ Personal communication, March 6, 2019

Situating Student Success Efforts at the Departmental Level

Working to realize change at the departmental level has many advantages. First, when college-wide initiatives aimed at improving degree/certificate attainment rates or eliminating equity gaps are in place, even well-intentioned faculty are prone to making statements such as, “There is a college-wide committee working on that issue.” And, “Sure, the college has an achievement gap, but I don’t see it our department.” Or, “Latino students do fine in my classes, but for some reason they just don’t seem to persist to a degree.” This is somewhat like saying that “the nation has a problem with gun violence, but I haven’t experienced any issues in my town.” In both cases, statistics pertaining to the larger entity (college-level equity gaps or gun violence in America) likely do not align perfectly with data within a smaller unit (say, a life sciences department or a small town in Ohio), making it easy to discount the numbers and allow the issue to be someone else’s responsibility.

Second, by necessity college-wide committees must be limited to a certain number of members. The handful of faculty and administrators serving on these committees may be able to recruit a few others to help out, but in the end, only they are held accountable for identifying and carrying out new initiatives; the other 99 percent of faculty and staff have few meaningful responsibilities. To be truly effective and sustainable, student success should be everyone’s job. When efforts to improve persistence and attainment or to eliminate equity gaps are situated at the departmental level, *every faculty member in every department* bears some responsibility for the outcomes. By narrowly focusing investigations into who is succeeding and in what courses, sequences, and majors, faculty are no longer able to rely on the “other people are working on that” excuse. The students who are persisting (or not), reaching credit milestones (or not), transferring (or not), or attaining a credential (or not) are the same ones in their classes each day. In other words, addressing barriers to student success at the departmental level utilizes the faculty’s existing motivation to help *their* students succeed.

Situating student success efforts at the departmental level is also sensible because persistence and attainment patterns vary immensely across disciplines. Utilizing data specific to each department—perhaps even drilling down to the disciplines or majors—helps to eliminate the noise in college-wide data. Using department-specific data allows faculty to determine *what* is occurring in their department, which then leads them to ask *why*

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those patterns have emerged. Perhaps most importantly, this approach focuses possible solutions to the departmental programs and policies over which faculty have some control. Of course, faculty won't be able to ameliorate all barriers to student success on their own, but understanding what they can do within the department and where they require help from administrators can surface very specific ways in which college leaders can support the work. These asks are often administrative in nature, such as lifting certain enrollment caps so that the English department can ameliorate a bottleneck in English 101 or assigning additional advisors to the physical science department to help them advise students who are considering switching majors.

The Importance of Data (and What Data?)

Some efficiency-minded college leaders might be tempted to run analyses of persistence and attainment rates, equity gaps, and so forth for each department and then hand over the results, asking faculty to take it from there. While this approach may indeed accelerate the research stage of the process, providing faculty—perhaps led or coordinated by department chairs—with data to scrutinize their own students' success in various ways is imperative. Professors are scientists; they are trained to be skeptical, to ask why, to investigate how. Hearing that there is an equity gap in their department from presidents or provosts will be less impactful than providing faculty with the data and tools to understand that gap—and the departmental factors that might be contributing to it—on their own. While this process may vary somewhat from department to department (and across academic and more occupational areas of the college), it might begin with department chairs facilitating a session with their faculty to discuss known and potential student success challenges and concerns and then identify research questions and analyses that would need to be conducted (with the support of IR) to empirically explore these patterns.

Some large community colleges—Valencia College in Florida, for one—as well as many large university systems (for example, California State University) have worked to create intricate data dashboards that allow faculty to explore information related to the success of students at the departmental, disciplinary, and in some cases, major levels. Through

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these data dashboards, college leaders have provided faculty with tools to examine what is working and what isn't, and to identify and lead iterative solutions to recognized problems. For example, faculty might utilize a data dashboard to examine persistence rates of first-year students by race/ethnicity; rates of migration in and out of majors; equity gaps among students in various disciplines; credit accumulation rates by part- and full-time enrollment status; success rates in prerequisite or commonly taken courses or sequences; the relationship between hours worked on- or off-campus to grades earned in courses; or any other type of question related to student success.

However, most small and mid-size community colleges do not have the resources to create such intricate data dashboards. For faculty to investigate some of these questions, they will need to partner with college institutional effectiveness/research (IR) personnel. As this may be more time-consuming—both for faculty and for the IR staffers crunching the numbers for each separate department—it may be useful to identify a handful of important questions to consider first. These may include:

- In which of my department's courses do students struggle, based on course grade point averages (GPAs) and unsatisfactory outcomes (Ds, Fs, and unauthorized withdrawals, also known as DFWs)? Are there equity gaps among underserved students and their peers? In which courses are these gaps most apparent?
- How do students perform (based on course GPAs and DFWs) in common course sequences (e.g., Calculus 1 to Calculus 2, English 1A to English 1B)? How do success rates vary by race/ethnicity, gender, Pell receipt, and first-generation designation?
- Where are my department's bottlenecks (i.e., impasses where students cannot enroll in a course needed to progress toward their degrees, or courses in which some students are consistently struggling)? Are these *technical bottlenecks* that can be addressed by adding capacity or removing policy barriers? Technical bottlenecks might include inadequate numbers of course sections; long waitlists; restrictions related to unit limits, prerequisites, or other institutional policies; enrollment priority given to certain students; and so forth. Alternatively, these may be *academic bottlenecks*: courses with high rates of DFWs and/or large numbers of students retaking the course(s). Faculty might investigate if academic bottlenecks are consistent across all sections of a given course, or only certain ones. They may ask if the bottlenecks affect all students in the same way or if they have a disproportionate impact on certain groups.
- How quickly do students reach credit milestones or progress toward a degree or certificate in my department? How does this vary by race/ethnicity, gender, Pell receipt, and first-generation designation?
- Which students in my department transfer to four-year colleges or universities (and when)? Are equity gaps apparent among these transfers?

The preceding questions can give faculty a fairly good sense of the major barriers to student success in their departments and should also help to clarify why certain gaps may occur. But these broad topics are only a starting point; faculty and IR personnel should expect an iterative process of asking questions, analyzing data, drilling deeper by asking more targeted questions, and so on. This, of course, will be far easier for colleges with multiple institutional researchers than for those institutions with only a one-person IR unit. One solution for smaller colleges might be for IR personnel to provide a crash course to faculty in running analyses (using IR databases and software) on current and former students. Another might be to start this process one department at a time, so as not to overwhelm IR offices with too many requests for data at once.

This complication raises a very real resource allocation issue. Given limited budgets and innumerable worthy ways to spend discretionary dollars, college leaders might consider the long-term benefits of investing more heavily in institutional research as a way of equipping faculty and departments with the intelligence needed to enact change. Such investments would fundamentally shift the mission of many IR offices from data reporting and accountability to one more focused on collaborating with faculty and staff to improve student outcomes.

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So We've Identified Some Barriers. What's Next?

It would be a mistake to conceptualize this approach to improving student success as something that occurs in discrete stages. Instead, the research, design, intervention, and assessment phases occur and reoccur in an iterative fashion. Nonetheless, it may be useful to foreshadow several broad ways in which faculty may wish to act upon the student success barriers and gaps they have identified in their departments.

Persistence Problems and Equity Gaps

If persistence problems or equity gaps exist in certain courses or sequences, the first step may be for faculty and staff in the affected areas to engage in difficult conversations about *why* these issues exist, as well as what might be done to ameliorate them. There will certainly be external factors contributing to persistence problems (students working 30 or more hours per week, home and family responsibilities, etc.), but there are likely

institutional contributors as well: an instructional approach that appears to alienate female students; a certain course offered at a time of day that may be difficult for working students to attend; few opportunities for students of color to interact with professors or advisers who look like them; and so forth.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to addressing persistence problems or equity gaps. The causes of the discrepancies are likely multiple and varied, and interventions will need to be highly targeted. While faculty and administrators may be tempted to seek a silver bullet that can improve student success across an entire department (math, for example), a more likely (and hypothetical) scenario is that the five faculty members who teach developmental math incorporate additional short-term courses or content modules; those teaching introductory math sequences reexamine assessments with the aim of broadening the ways in which students can demonstrate competency; and a third committee is charged with modifying the existing math lab to increase utilization of tutoring services among students of color.

Academic Bottlenecks

If faculty identify academic bottlenecks in their department, they may consider incorporating human- or technology-enhanced solutions to increase the percentage of students passing courses in which they frequently struggle. These may include early alert systems, tutoring, learning communities, supplemental instruction, peer mentoring, mandatory advising, and so forth. These interventions may be targeted to all students in a given course or sequence, or they may be tailored to specific groups. The important thing is that faculty need not reinvent the wheel. Over the years, community colleges have developed a deep repertoire of student support programs and services, and faculty can simply identify and implement the solutions that are most closely aligned to the problems they are trying to solve. (Many of these solutions are described in great detail in reports from Achieving the Dream and other initiatives.) Even if the education department (for example) doesn't have direct experience with mandatory advising, someone on campus likely does have that expertise, and faculty and staff in other departments may be able to share best practices and/or advise on implementation.

Technical Bottlenecks

If technical bottlenecks have been identified, possible solutions may involve adding sections of high-demand courses or adjusting or suspending unit-limitation or wait-list policies to allow students to enroll in the courses they need to progress toward a degree or certificate. Some of these changes can be authorized at the departmental level; others may require central administrative approval. In all cases, there is likely a historical reason why a given policy was instituted, and faculty and administrators hoping for quick approval of their request to modify a policy should try to understand the origin of the rule, as well as the ripple effects of suspending or eliminating it. Arming the person responsible

for repealing or adjusting a policy with the pros and cons of that action (even if the only con is that it will require some staff to do things differently) will pave the way for timely decisions.

Discovering the Unknown

Sometimes when faculty dig into departmental data to identify barriers to student success, they identify a problem (or two or three), but they have very little information to help them understand why the problem exists. In these cases, it may be prudent to collect additional data through follow-up surveys or focus groups with students. For example, faculty in a history department may notice that students make satisfactory progress toward credit milestones in their first year of enrollment, but that persistence drops precipitously in year two. Focus groups with second-year students may shed some light on the causes, as would follow-up telephone surveys with students who exhibited this enrollment pattern within the past three years. Institutional datasets will not hold the answers to all questions related to student progress and success. Sometimes educated guesses or generalizations from the literature are appropriate; in other circumstances, it may be best to further research the causes.

Challenges and Issues to Consider

There will be costs associated with enabling faculty-led student success efforts, both direct and indirect. Unlike many large, one-size-fits-all initiatives, an iterative approach such as this assumes that the work of improving student success is ongoing and thus will require the allocation of resources continuously and over time. While there may be grant money available to assist colleges in embarking upon this approach, leaders will need to plan and budget accordingly.

To do so, it may be wise to ask each department to build a plan of action that includes the costs of interventions and iterative assessments. Specifically, once faculty have identified the major barriers to student success in their department and brainstormed interventions or plans for further research, each department (or smaller unit, if appropriate) can create an action plan that describes the identified problems, proposes solutions, details the human and financial costs of the interventions, and explains how progress will be assessed and used to inform subsequent actions. These plans can then be presented to department chairs

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(assuming they have the resources and authority to green light them) and/or central administrators, if costs or resource requirements exceed what can be authorized within departments.

The department chair or a designated faculty member within each department should be aware of all plans to improve student progress and success and/or eliminate equity gaps in their area. Having a designated person will position them to identify commonalities among initiatives, as well as cost- or resource-sharing opportunities, and they can approach college leaders with a single request that will cover the direct and indirect costs of the work. Similarly, it may be wise for a provost or other central administrator to collate action plans across departments. That administrator can play a similar role in terms of identifying commonalities and cost-sharing opportunities across the college, and act as the convener to discuss what each department has learned and how they are working to improve student progress and success.

Budgeting and planning in this way allows colleges to make numerous strategic investments in student success. Some investments may be small and others may be substantial, but because they function independently of one another, they should be easier to modify or reallocate as goals are met or as new issues arise.

Given resource constraints, however, most community college leaders will make difficult decisions about what to fund immediately and what to put on the back burner. To aid them in these decisions, administrators will want to engage in cost-benefit analyses. Expensive initiatives aimed at smaller populations will likely be less of a priority than lower-cost programs with the potential to affect many more students. However, each community college's unique history, enrollment and completion patterns, and equity gaps may also inform institutional decisions about what to fund first.

Another issue to consider is how part-time faculty can be involved in these efforts. As mentioned earlier, faculty are already invested in student success; it is their job to help students learn and to contribute to the functioning of their department and the overall institution. However, this statement is somewhat biased toward full-time faculty. Part-timers are primarily there only to teach their classes; very few are engaged on campus in other ways, as they are not compensated for doing so. Yet if a community college truly wants to create a culture in which all faculty and staff have responsibility for student success, it must incentivize or reward contingent faculty for participating in both the investigations into student success barriers and the associated interventions.

Each community college's unique history, enrollment and completion patterns, and equity gaps may also inform institutional decisions about what to fund first.

WHAT COLLEGE LEADERS CAN DO

There are several important ways in which college leaders can support these departmental efforts and ensure accountability. First, presidents and their senior staff can create and reinforce a culture of rewarding data-derived student success efforts at the departmental level. Doing so will involve verbally emphasizing the faculty-led nature of the process—both the investigations into student success gaps and barriers and the plans to address them—but also contributing resources. Central administrators will need to resist overriding faculty-designed action plans with programs or initiatives of their own and instead will need to identify and allocate sufficient resources to put the action plans to work. While it is unreasonable to imagine that a college will fund every initiative aimed at every barrier in every department, presidents and senior staff will need to underwrite enough of these interventions—spread across the departments—or risk faculty viewing this work as an unfunded and ultimately an ineffectual mandate.

Creating a culture of data-derived student success efforts at the departmental level will also require that college leaders set clear mandates for IR personnel to collaborate with faculty, both in identifying the initial problems and in iteratively assessing progress. Presidents or central administrators charged with coordinating these efforts should also set clear expectations and timelines for departments to identify student success challenges and plans to address them. Without such expectations, student success improvement efforts could fall into “ongoing committee work” territory; reasonable but firm deadlines create the necessary urgency for faculty to act.

In addition, college leaders can support the faculty’s efforts by offering release time or stipends for those spearheading investigations into student success barriers and/or those charged with implementing solutions. Stipends may be especially important if the college aims to involve contingent faculty in these efforts. With that said, college leaders should carefully consider the strategy and messaging around stipends and release time. On one hand, these are effective tools for rewarding work. On the other, the approach outlined here relies on college leaders continually reinforcing the point that student success is everyone’s responsibility. If only a handful of faculty receive stipends, others may feel that they are also being asked to contribute time and energy but are not being compensated for it.

One solution may be to offer stipends or release time to those faculty spearheading research into student success gaps and barriers, but to make clear that all work related to brainstorming, implementing, and assessing interventions falls under every faculty member's existing responsibility to help students succeed. Incorporating this expectation into promotion, tenure, and advancement processes may help to drive the point home (although that may be more complicated in colleges that operate under collective bargaining agreements). Wise college leaders will also consider the sustainability of offering monetary rewards for this work. Although the first year or two will likely take more time and energy than subsequent years, enabling faculty-led student success efforts is not something that can be accomplished in one, two, or even five years; it is a long-term pursuit that must be iterative in nature. Release time or stipends may be useful at the beginning, but ultimately college leaders will want to integrate faculty-led student success efforts into existing "service" requirements so that they can become part of the faculty's everyday responsibilities. Presidents and senior staff might also consider what other committee assignments or responsibilities they can take off faculty members' plates to free up time to work on these issues. Similarly, college leaders might consider other less tangible rewards, including publicizing interesting findings at all-college meetings; celebrating small successes both within and across departments; and frequently reporting to the campus and outside communities about progress being made.

Finally, central administrators charged with coordinating faculty-led student success efforts can create forums for faculty to discuss with colleagues across campus what they learned about student success barriers in their department; what they plan to do about it; and what outcomes they have achieved. This serves another purpose as well, as some barriers to student success may span multiple departments and may need to be addressed college-wide or via interdisciplinary collaboration. These forums can become a breeding ground for cross-campus partnerships to address student success gaps within certain student populations, as well as for how resources may be shared. Furthermore, by enabling the sharing of ideas and resources, successes and challenges, college leaders can help faculty feel like they are part of something that is larger than the sum of their individual efforts. For example, a sociology professor may feel a substantial amount of pride that she and her colleagues have eliminated technical bottlenecks and reduced equity gaps in all sociology sequences, but that sense of accomplishment will be amplified when she sees her efforts mirrored across campus, and when the institution is able to show how all of this work, added together, has resulted in smaller equity gaps and improved student persistence and completion across the board.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Create and reinforce **a culture of rewarding data-derived student success efforts** at the department level.
- Set **clear mandates for IR personnel** to collaborate with faculty to identify the initial problems and iteratively assess progress.
- **Enable faculty to share ideas, resources, successes, and challenges**—help them feel like they are part of something that is larger than the sum of their individual efforts.
- Consider **offering release time or stipends for faculty** who are spearheading investigations into and/or finding solutions for student success barriers.
- Over the long term, **integrate faculty-led student success efforts** into existing “service” requirements so that they can become part of the faculty’s everyday responsibilities.
- Allow faculty to **publicize their findings** at all-college meetings; **celebrate successes** both within and across departments; and frequently report to the campus and outside communities.
- **Create forums for faculty** to discuss what they have learned about student success barriers in their departments; what they plan to do about it; and what outcomes they have achieved.

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